FLABBERGASTED

ALBA PRATALIA

FLABBERGASTED

At an airport you are surrounded by a long list of temptations that are legally, morally, and socially inadvisable — and yet somehow feel mandatory, like hobbies you didn't ask for.

Nathan knew them all.

— Make a bomb/drug joke at security? Hilarious. Also a one-way ticket to a fluorescent interview room and a lifetime of not knowing whether anyone will ever nod politely at you again.
— Jump on the luggage carousel and ride it like an amusement park? Peak content. Also instant viral regret and a carousel worker with the face of a man who was once a poet and now folds sweaters for a living.
— Answer “sex tourism” when the immigration officer asks “Purpose of visit?” Brilliant. Also the sort of answer that makes passport stamps turn into subpoenas.

Those are easy, obvious sins. The one Nathan had no business flirting with, the one that hummed under his skin like a neon siren in a Greek myth, was smaller, furrier, and infinitely more persuasive.

The narcotics-sniffing dog.

They stand by the security line like undercover saints — immaculate coats, noses of divine engineering, and eyes that look at you as if you are a biography they're not inclined to finish. They are doing holy work. They are also the softest thing in Terminal 3.

Nathan's internal monologue went like this, rapid-fire and unhelpful:

"Do not pet the dog. Do not touch the dog. Do not whisper in dog. Do not feed the dog your boarding pass. You are not leaving this airport with a dog as a carry-on."

But the dog leaned into the universe's gravitational pull for Nathan. A muzzle angled toward his ankles. A paw that could have been sculpted by mercy. The dog blinked two clean, scandalous blinks and every cautionary tale about self-control died on the spot.

"Bad Nathan," he told himself. "Stay. Walk in line." He practiced walking in lines because walking is a skill and airports are full of people who have lost the manual.

He tried other strategies. He stared ironically at a duty-free bottle of gin until his eyes watered. He read the back of his own boarding pass like it was a religious text. He mentally composed a tweet about restraint. All noble, all destined to fail.

Then the dog sniffed his shoe. It wasn't a beg, it was an inspection. The dog's tail executed a diplomatic wag. Nathan's hand moved like an unapproved app update. One finger found the dog's ear.

It was a single, amateurish scratch — the smallest of betrayals. The dog sighed, which in dog language meant: "Finally, someone with taste." In human language it meant Nathan had handed his dignity over in exchange for an eyelid droop and an offered tongue of pure, unambiguous affection.

A security guard cleared his throat. Nathan froze, the way toast freezes in a toaster when someone walks into the kitchen with a question. The guard didn't scold. He smiled like a man who had been there and understood the physics of small delights.

"Enjoy your flight, sir," the guard said.

Nathan straightened up, embarrassed and oddly elevated. He had almost committed airport heresy and only got a look that could be filed under "mild indulgence." He returned to the line, palms clean of scandal, except for the faint smell of dog and the permanent knowledge that he will never, ever be able to walk past a working canine without auditioning for petting.

He told himself the rules were rules. He repeated them like a mantra. But man is a creature of habits and airports are curriculum vitae for impulse.

He resisted the carousel, refrained from the joke that would have added an unpleasant punctuation to his day, and said, very boringly, “Tourism,” at immigration. Then he walked in line — a good citizen, a slightly guilty man, and someone who would Google “where to adopt a dog” the second he landed.

Nathan is not innocent. He is practiced. He is tired. He is, above all, honest about the small crimes that feel like salvation: a single scratch behind the ear, a trade-off between true restraint and the soft gravity of a dog who knows exactly where to put his head.

Bad Nathan. Stay. Walk in line. But maybe — just maybe — scratch once more when no one is looking.

At the hotel desk, the clerk beamed the kind of smile that could only be powered by industrial-strength

denial.
“Did you have a nice flight, sir?”

Nathan blinked. “What?”

“As in—was your flight pleasant?”

Nathan looked at her the way Socrates probably looked at the first man who suggested he stop drinking hemlock and try chamomile instead. “Ma’am,” he began, “since the dawn of aviation, *no one* has had a nice flight. Not one. Lindbergh didn’t have a nice flight — he hallucinated gremlins over the Atlantic and landed looking like an unbaked croissant. Amelia Earhart didn’t even get to fill the customer satisfaction survey. Every flight since then has just been a series of mechanical humiliations at altitude.”

He leaned in. “Flying is controlled suffering wrapped in complimentary pretzels.”

The clerk kept smiling — the corporate kind of smile that could withstand nuclear criticism. "So… no checked bags then?"

Nathan sighed, half-alive, half-pressurized. "No. Just trauma and a faint smell of dog."

"Wonderful, sir," she said, typing like she was feeding data into the afterlife. "Enjoy your stay."

He took the room key. There was no point explaining. In hotels, airports, and marriages, everyone pretends to enjoy the turbulence.

Nathan opened his hotel room door like a man breaking into his own disappointment.

Once upon a time, there were metal keys — loyal, tangible, jingly bastards that made you feel like you had *a room*. You'd twist, it'd click, and voilà — sanctuary. Then one day, some hotel manager said, "You know what would improve this? Failure." And

thus was born the plastic key card: the offspring of a parking ticket and a broken promise.

He stood before the door, card in hand, engaging in the sacred ritual known as “Swipe ’Til You Hate Yourself.”
In. Out. **Bleeng** — red.
Again. Faster. Inoutinoutinout. **Bleeng** — red.
Slower, like foreplay. In… out… **Bleeng** — red.
Angry now. In–out–in–out— **blip!** Green!
Victory!
Except his stupid muscle memory, that Pavlovian reflex forged in hell, made him swipe once more.
Bleeng.
Back to red. Of course.

So he kicked the door, cursed three deities, two saints, and an airline. Finally got in.

And then — silence. A dead room. Darker than an unpaid therapist’s soul. Nothing worked. Because apparently, in modern hospitality, electricity is a privilege you earn by proving occupancy.

He fumbled around until he found the wall slot — the Card Throne. Slid it in. *Click.* Power. Civilization returns.

Except no, not really. Because what *lights*?
One desk lamp half the brightness of a dying firefly.
One bedside abat-jour pretending to be romantic but mostly just highlighting dust.
And the ceiling? The ceiling was a philosophical statement — an ode to absence.

He pressed every switch like a man debugging his own sanity. Nothing. Just the faint hum of an overworked mini-fridge and the existential whisper of beige wallpaper.

Nathan sat on the bed, that overchlorinated rectangle of sadness, and looked around. "Hotel," he muttered, "you charge $180 a night and give me the lighting of a hostage video."

He lay back. One lamp flickered out. The other joined it in solidarity.

Somewhere, down in reception, the clerk smiled to herself. “I hope he’s enjoying his stay.”

Nathan entered the next phase of the hotel experience: digital self-care.
He connected to the Wi-Fi, which promised “Premium High-Speed Internet.”
Translation: a hamster on a treadmill, powered by regret.

The first browser tab was, naturally, **xVideos**—the library of Alexandria for people with one hand on civilization and the other on themselves. Because everyone knows: Latin American amateur videos are better than Pornhub. Raw, honest, shot with love, sweat, and a Nokia from 2007.

He clicked.
Load...
A thumbnail.
Half of another thumbnail.
Frozen pixels—like erotic cubism.

“Come on,” Nathan hissed. “If I wanted suspense, I’d call my ex.”

He disconnected. Reconnected with mobile data. Sweet, blessed 4G. Civilization reborn.

Clothes came off like democracy in decline—piece by piece, reluctantly but inevitably. He positioned himself with the grace of a man auditioning for a crime scene. The phone propped on the nightstand, tilted at the perfect 42-degree angle known only to ancient monks and men in hotel rooms.

The video finally ran smooth. Colombian amateur couple, waterfall background, nature’s soundtrack. Passion, humidity, and low camera stabilization.

Nathan watched with the full anthropological detachment of a man pretending he’s “just studying human connection.” The music of splashing water. The dialogue in Spanish that he barely understood but emotionally related to.

And then—bliss, like the Wi-Fi suddenly working, like justice arriving on time. The grand finale. Curtain call.

He collapsed back onto the hotel bed, breathing like a jazz trumpet after a solo. Stared at the ceiling that refused to be lit. A philosopher of bad decisions, surrounded by sheets that now qualified as modern art.

He didn't even reach for tissues. He just sighed, somewhere between repentance and satisfaction.

"Five stars," he murmured, "for mobile data performance."

Then rolled over and fell asleep under the sacred glow of the desk lamp, the last witness to another chapter in the tragicomedy of man, modem, and mortality.

Nathan woke up at 2:47 a.m., the sacred hour when all hotel carpets start whispering *regret* and the

minibar starts looking like a viable therapist.
He was thirsty. Not for water. For something that could dissolve memory.

He called reception.
“Bar still open?”

A pause. The kind that contains sighs, heartbreak, and the sound of someone realizing their life didn’t turn out the way they hoped.
“Not really, sir,” said the receptionist. Sleepy, polite, existentially defeated.

“Dammit.”

Click. End call.

Fine. Modern solutions. Uber Eats.
He scrolled like a man determined to make poor decisions faster than delivery can arrive.
Vodka. Gin. Rum. Tequila. Cointreau. Iced tea.
His cart looked like a chemistry set designed by Bukowski.

“Artisanal long islands, I reckon,” he said to himself, approving the order like a degenerate curator.

And as he waited, half-dressed, half-dead, fully inspired, he began to rant out loud to the dark room:

“Also—why the hell use cola? It’s called iced tea, not iced cola! You’re supposed to be drunk, not diabetic! Long Island Iced *Tea*, dammit, not Coke with an identity crisis!”

He raised a finger like a philosopher discovering fire.
“It’s the tea that gives it culture. The cola is bourgeois camouflage. Tea is civilization. Tea is empire. Tea—”

Bzzzzt. Delivery at the door.
Nathan opened it like a mad monk receiving communion.

There it was: a plastic bag of bad ideas, sweating in condensation, delivered by a man who'd seen too much.
"Party?" the driver asked.

Nathan took the bag, dead-eyed. "Autopsy."

He mixed it all in a single hotel glass—the kind meant for mouthwash—and took a heroic sip.
It burned, hummed, corrected his posture.

He sat on the bed again, phone glowing, contemplating life, alcohol, and the metaphysics of mixers.

Outside, dawn was still hours away.
Inside, Nathan had achieved enlightenment:
the knowledge that civilization peaked the moment someone mixed five liquors and called it *tea*.

Nathan remembered India the way veterans remember wars and hangovers — with reverence, horror, and the occasional phantom sweat.

His *tuc-tuc* driver had introduced himself not with a name, but with an act of minor abduction: he simply grabbed Nathan's suitcase at the train station and declared, "You're my passenger during your stay, like it or not." And that was that. A bond had been forged — part kidnapping, part concierge service, part karmic punishment.

Each night, Nathan would emerge from his hotel, already half-melted by the heat, and surrender to the rickshaw's metallic coffin.
"Bring me somewhere with a cocktail bar," he said one night, voice parched like it had been sandblasted.

The driver nodded with the solemnity of a surgeon and immediately replied:
"Young girls, sir?"

Nathan blinked. "Oh no, thanks. I'm just trying to relax these days. India is... a challenge to enjoying oneself."

The driver considered this. “Maybe more mature women?”

“Nice idea,” said Nathan, “but really, no thanks.”

“Men?”

“Dude. No.”

“Children?”

Nathan’s neck snapped around. “The *fuck*? You out of your mind? Do I have to get the police?”

“Nonono, sir,” the driver waved, smiling in that universal expression of someone who thinks everything can be smoothed over by smiling wider. “Only for taking pictures.”

Nathan stared. “You’re *not* helping your case.”

“Ah... at cricket club,” the man said, switching tone as though changing universes, “they have *tremendously iced martinis*.”

That line hit Nathan like a religious conversion. Martinis. Iced. In this hellscape of curry-scented heat and diesel fumes.
The words alone dropped his body temperature by three degrees.

He unclenched his fists. “Drive,” he said, “before I start forgiving you.”

The *tuc-tuc* rattled off into the chaos — trucks honking, cows philosophizing in the middle of intersections, a holy man brushing his teeth in public with alarming confidence.

Nathan, wind-blasted, shirt plastered to his spine, thought: *This country will kill me, but at least it will chill my gin first.*

Nathan opened the curtains with the ceremonial gravity of a man about to commit an act of historical stupidity.
The blinds clattered open. The city glared back.
He stood there—naked, heroic, holding a Long

Island Iced Tea like a philosopher grasping the Grail of bad decisions.

Below: taxis, neon signs, the distant sound of air conditioning units dying.
Across the U-shaped courtyard: identical rooms, each glowing with that pale, serial-killer hotel light.

He took a sip. Felt divine. The gin hummed hymns in his veins.
And then, as all men before him since the dawn of twitching anatomy have done, he started performing the oldest ritual in the male repertoire: **the helicopter.**

Majestic, aerodynamic, a feat of engineering and delusion.
Nature, he thought, had been remarkably generous in *that* department — a rare cosmic oversight in his favor. “Thank you, Gaia,” he muttered, “for this propeller of joy.”

He spun faster, catching the faint reflection of himself in the opposite window.
If Michelangelo had seen this, he thought, *he'd have quit marble and gone into comedy.*

He squinted across the courtyard, hoping for an audience.
Some lonely accountant or a honeymoon couple in quiet despair. Someone who might accidentally look up and witness this rotating hymn to absurd masculinity.

And somewhere, surely, someone did.
A pale man in a bathrobe on the seventh floor froze mid-sip of instant coffee. His face drained. His posture folded. He reached for the absurdly small paper bin—one of those delicate hotel trash cans that could barely hold a tissue, let alone the weight of trauma—and vomited with the elegance of modern hospitality.

Nathan saluted him across the void, drink raised, hips still in motion.

A toast to human connection, to symmetry, to the international brotherhood of regret.

Then, as the room light flickered and the Long Island sloshed onto the carpet, Nathan whispered to himself,
"God bless hotels. They bring out the worst in us so politely."

Next day: hotel breakfast. *Complementary.*
Which in hotel dialect means: **Dante's Inferno**, culinary edition — the Circle of Gourmet Retaliation.

Nathan remembered James Bond's elegant line from *From Russia with Love*:

"Breakfast for one at nine, please. Green figs. Yogurt. Coffee — very black. Thank you."

He laughed. The sound of a man remembering civilization.

“Ahahahahahahaa.
If only. Hahahahahahaha.”

He looked at the buffet spread — an all-you-can-suffer museum exhibit.
The scrambled eggs had seen things.
The sausages glistened like existential despair.
The orange juice had the pH of printer toner.
The toast was not toasted; it was merely *browned by rumor.*

Nathan surveyed it all, murmuring to himself like a pilgrim reaching the gates of the damned:

Through me the way into the city dolent,
through me the way to the eternal buffet of the lost.

He turned around. Salvation lay in escape.
Nearest diner. No prayers, no plastic cheese, no yogurt pretending to be cultured.

He ordered redemption:
Fried eggs, sunny-side up, yolks running like truth.

Grilled ham, crisp and honest.
Fresh tomato, still remembering it came from earth.
And — like holy oil at a pagan altar — *"Bring Tabasco."*

He took the first bite and thought, with genuine reverence,

Abandon blandness, all ye who enter here.

Now came the age-old logistical dilemma: getting from Point A to Point B, without losing one's faith in civilization.

Uber.
Taxi.
The eternal dialectic of the postmodern wanderer.

"Taxi?" Nathan muttered. "Do they still exist?"
Well, yes—in Europe, of course. Land of cultural preservation and bureaucratic nostalgia. Where taxis cost a kidney and a half, and someone always says,

“Oh no, taking a taxi is *so bourgeois*. You must take public transportation.”

Public transportation.
Nathan shuddered.
He had taken enough cramped buses in his life — pressed between a backpack, a crying baby, and a man eating tuna like it was performance art. Never again. Never. Again.

But Uber? Oh no. Europeans clutch pearls at the mention.
“Unfair!” they say. “Unethical! It hurts the taxi industry!”

To which Nathan, sipping his iced tea cocktail of contempt, replied, “Yes. That’s the point.”

A German once tried to explain it to him — in that reasonable, over-engineered tone that made you want to throw sausages at him.
“Taxi drivers must buy a licence, you see. Uber is unfair competition.”

“Unfair?” Nathan had laughed. “Buddy, have you *met* capitalism?”

Because here’s the thing: the only perspective that matters is the user’s.
Not the license, not the regulation, not the nostalgia for men who call you *mein Freund* before charging double.

Is it easier?
Yes.
Cheaper?
Yes.
Better?
Absolutely.

Then that’s it.
The invisible hand of the market has given you a ride, and it’s a black Toyota Prius with a guy named Vladislav who offers gum and silence.

“Fuck taxi mafia,” Nathan said, summoning his phone like a sword.
“I’ll Uber myself to oblivion.”

Tap.

Destination: anywhere but here.

Nathan leaned back in the Uber, watching the map crawl across his phone like a digital tapeworm, and began the inevitable rant.

“Fuck Europe,” he muttered. “Just—fuck Europe in general.”

A continent of museum curators pretending it’s still 1899, where everyone looks at the rest of the planet like it’s a cultural safari: *go admire the locals, eat something spicy, post a photo, and retreat to your IKEA-decorated sadness.*

Arrogant, judgmental pricks, the lot of them.
Each convinced they’re enlightened because they

separate their trash and once read *Camus* while hungover in Marseille.

They treat the rest of the world like a theme park: "Oh, how *quaint!* The traffic! The smells! The poverty! The authenticity!"
Then back they go — to Lisbon apartments with inspirational quotes on the wall, to Berlin coworking spaces full of people who "don't believe in hierarchy," to Prague where everyone dresses like an existential pastry.

Nathan imagined them returning home after their brave journey abroad, patting themselves on the back for surviving three nights in "real Asia."
They fly back to their "only real reality": train commutes, 60-square-meter lives, and the smug certainty that moral superiority counts as culture.

"Hello!" Nathan wanted to shout at the continent. "The *real planet* exists beyond Rome's suburbs. A French banlieue is not *real misery*, it's a poorly lit IKEA showroom with police tape."

He sipped his plastic-cup martini, staring out the window.
"In Argentina or Australia," he said, "a four-hour drive means *visiting your neighbor.* In Europe, it's an *interrail adventure*—with hashtags and trauma."

The Uber driver, some patient Balkan philosopher of a man, said nothing.
He just nodded once, like someone who'd seen the Eiffel Tower, hated it, and got over it decades ago.

The Uber stopped, sighed, and released Nathan onto the curb like a mildly defective parcel.

He looked around — five, maybe seven meters of sidewalk, but what a zoological miracle. *Tattooed humanity* as far as the eye could see. Forearms like illustrated manuscripts. Thighs serving as exhibition space. Even necks — poor, tender necks — carrying entire manifestos in cursive fonts that had clearly lost the war against legibility.

Nathan stared in awe. “Wow,” he thought, “so many brave people. So much epidermal courage.”

He, a man who once had to be *sedated* for his COVID vaccine, could barely handle a mosquito bite, let alone a decorative assault by a vibrating needle. Yet here they were — walking frescoes, moving altarpieces of bad decisions and artistic conviction.

Nathan loved short clothes. Absolutely adored them. A moral good. A civic duty. But the courage behind the ink? The stoic pain tolerance? That was a species apart.

He walked into the bar, still flabbergasted — the word already loading in his brain like an old vinyl warming up.

The place smelled of gin, leather, and people trying to forget their last text message.

He sat at the counter, looked the bartender straight in the eyes, and declared solemnly,
“Flabbergasted.”

The bartender didn’t blink. Didn’t nod. Just turned, grabbed a frosty bottle, poured a perfect shot, and set it down with ritual precision.

“Iced Steinhäger,” he said, sliding it forward. “And a side of ossenworst.”

Nathan smiled. Finally — civilization.
The man didn’t ask questions. Didn’t offer sympathy. Didn’t suggest therapy.

He simply read a single word, *flabbergasted,* and translated it instantly into the only universal language left: cold schnapps and raw sausage.

“Raw onion,” said the voice behind him.

Nathan turned — and there, like a plot twist in corduroy, stood his colleague. The kind of man who

could appear in any bar on Earth and instantly look like he'd been there since construction.

They laughed, hugged — that masculine, slightly awkward shoulder-collision that means *I missed you, but let's pretend it's about beer.*

The colleague grinned. "Raw sausage demands raw onion."

Nathan turned to order, but the barman — clairvoyant, Teutonic, and clearly trained at Hogwarts School of Gastro-Alchemy — was *already* placing a small plate of raw onions on the counter.

"So fast!" said Nathan. "I'm flabbergasted!"

At which point the barman, without a single word, produced another iced Steinhäger and another ossenworst — as though the word *flabbergasted* itself triggered some Prussian incantation.

The glasses clinked. The air chilled. The smell of juniper and raw meat filled the moment with divine absurdity.

It was like saying *Frau Blücher!* — and the horses outside, somewhere in the cobblestoned distance, neighed in perfect, terrified harmony.

Then — as though summoned by absurdity itself — a man with a hump appeared at the doorway. Eyeballs bulging heroically, silhouette crooked like punctuation at the end of a nightmare.

He raised a trembling hand and declared, in full theatrical ecstasy:
"Flabbergasted!"

Instantly, as if the word carried sacred power, horses neighed somewhere in the foggy distance. Glasses trembled. A schnapps bottle wept condensation like holy water.

The barman, deadpan and duty-bound, performed the ritual: another iced Steinhäger, another ossenworst — sliding them across the counter with the precision of a priest delivering last rites.

The hunchback nodded gravely, as if confirming the natural order of things, and turned to leave.

From the hallway came the echo of a voice:
"Igor?"

He turned his head just enough for the lamplight to catch the glint in his bulging eyes.
"No," he said. "It's pronounced *Eye-gor*."

And he vanished into the night — followed by a prolonged wolf howl.

"Awooooooooooo."

The two men froze.
Friend: "Werewolf?"
Nathan, without missing a beat: "There."
Friend: "What?"

Nathan pointed at the door. “*Therewolf.*”
Then pointed at the bar. “*Therebooze.*”

They locked eyes — the sacred moment when stupidity and genius meet halfway and shake hands.

Together, they declared: “**Flabbergasted!**”

Outside, horses neighed again, in faithful obedience to the cosmic cue.
Inside, as if commanded by dark magic or German efficiency, the barman produced two more iced Steinhägers and two fresh plates of ossenworst.

The glasses clinked.
The night trembled.
And somewhere beyond the door, the werewolf ordered his own drink — presumably neat.

The past, Nathan thought, is a stupid toy chest. Everything in it is fake, miscolored, dented, and makes a sound that was never meant to exist. Open it, and you’re assaulted by nostalgia that squeaks.

Historians can write books, philosophers can moan about memory, but the true prophets—the real chroniclers of time—summed it up better than any of them ever could:

“Do you remember when we used to sing?
Sha-la-la, la-la, la-la, la-la, la-la tee-da.”

That was it. The whole of Western civilization in one doo-wop echo.

Then came the Italians, always turning melody into metaphysics:

“Donne, du du du…”

And when the moon rose over that eternal Mediterranean kitsch, someone always shouted the Gospel of the Vinyl Age:

“C’è una luna in mezzo al blu—za za za zaz! Za za za zaz za za za za!”

Nathan smiled into his drink.
That was history. Not dates, not wars, not revolutions.
Just humans trying to make sense of pain by rhyming it with nonsense syllables and pretending that sha-la-la was enough to hold back oblivion.

And maybe it was.

Nathan, in a sudden burst of divine idiocy, pulled out his phone and set it on the counter, front camera on, screen glaring like a confessional booth for the damned.

"Just smile and nod," he told his friend.
"Why?"
"Because we're making history—or at least fifteen seconds of it."

He hit *record*, posture instantly transforming: spine straight, jaw square, voice adopting that unmistakable influencer tone—half preacher, half vacuum salesman.

“Did you know,” Nathan began solemnly, “that Akira Kurosawa had a tooth growing in the middle of his palate—and that’s where he took the inspiration for *Rashomon*?”

A pause. He leaned closer to the camera.
“Follow me for more mind-blowing curiosities!”

Click. Video off.

The friend blinked. “Is that even remotely true?”

Nathan shrugged, poured himself another drink.
“No. But it’s *curious*, isn’t it?”

Friend frowned. “How much do you make per view?”

Nathan gave a slow, aristocratic sip and replied, “If you don’t like the service here, I can buy the place and have your server fired.”

And as if triggered by divine algorithm, the barman froze mid-polish, eyes wide, and whispered,
"Flabbergasted."

Instantly, from some invisible stable beyond time, horses neighed into the night.

With reverence and new-found fear, the barman poured *vintage* Steinhäger—chilled to metaphysical perfection—and laid out *premium* ossenworst on a porcelain plate, his every motion a trembling apology to forces greater than hospitality.

Nathan nodded approvingly.
The friend, quietly horrified, sipped his drink and muttered,
"Jesus Christ, it's contagious."

In 1927, Martin Heidegger published *Being and Time*, a cheerful little volume about—brace yourself—the concept of *being* and the concept of *time.*

As for *being*, Heidegger really went for it. He brought in the whole philosophical kitchen sink: *Sein* and *Seiendes* (being vs. beings), *Dasein* (the being that asks about being), *Zeitlichkeit* (temporality), *Sorge* (care), *Seinsgeschichte* (the history of being), and of course *Hermeneutik* (because Germans can't sneeze without doing it interpretively).

And then came *Geworfenheit*—"thrownness," the idea that you're hurled into existence like a drunk rugby ball, forced to make sense of being without a user manual.
Incidentally, that's also the title of another book by **Alba Pratalia**, Nathan's own author and patron saint of existential mockery—yes, this is metatextual product placement. We are fully self-aware.

As for *time*… nobody knows.
No human has ever read that far.
Heidegger's prose has the consistency of boiled granite, and scholars generally lose consciousness halfway through Chapter Two.

It is widely believed that even Heidegger himself never reached the section on time.
He probably outsourced it to a thousand rabid monkeys on meth, locked in a Black Forest cabin with typewriters and a copy of *Nietzsche for Dummies.*

Thus, *Being and Time* stands as one of the greatest unread masterpieces of modern philosophy—half ontological revelation, half cosmic prank—reminding us that in the end, *Dasein* may be finite, but confusion is eternal.

As for *hermeneutik* — Heidegger's favorite intellectual yoga pose — even Karl Popper, the eternal skeptic in spectacles, chimed in somewhere in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*.

Popper, in his ever-charming way, agreed that there is no such thing as *History* with a capital H — just as many interpretations as there are historians, and occasionally one who can spell "epistemology" without weeping.

Or something like that. It's in there, probably. Somewhere between chapters, buried under a landslide of footnotes and righteous indignation.

Nathan, of course, couldn't check. He was travelling. The book was at home, glaring from the shelf, holding its place in the universe with the weight of unread certainty.

So he just waved his hand and declared, "Anyway, it's there. According to me."

Because that's the beauty of *hermeneutik*: you don't need to be right. You just need to interpret *brilliantly*.

And if another scholar says the exact opposite? Perfect. Now both can be right. Or neither. Or both and neither at the same time, hermeneutically superposed like Schrödinger's academics.

In the end, truth may not exist — but confidence absolutely does.

So, anyway—Nathan and his friend were midway through the sacred rite of *raw sausage and raw onion*, washing it down with that crisp Mitteleuropean gin that tastes like an apology from the Ice Age.

Nathan, always the strategist of bad timing, leaned back and said,
"Weren't we supposed to meet those two girls—your friends?"

Friend, mid-chew, eyes glazed in the ecstasy of ossenworst, replied,
"Oh yes, yes. Should be here any moment."

Nathan gestured at the scene of the crime: the ossenworst, the onion, the twin glasses of Steinhäger sweating in guilt.
"And us with *this* breath?"

His friend shrugged, philosopher-like, with the serene indifference of a man who's made peace with

being olfactorily radioactive.
“They won’t mind.”

Nathan smiled. That cosmic, slow-motion smile of a man watching destiny put on clown shoes. He looked past his friend’s shoulder.

Friend froze. “They’re right behind me, aren’t they?”

Two voices, perfectly synchronized and already regretting their life choices, answered:
“We do. We *do* mind.”

Silence. The smell of onion hovered like a ghost that refused to leave.

The bartender, knowing the sacred cue, whispered:
“Flabbergasted.”

Outside, horses neighed mournfully into the night.

And with supernatural grace, two new glasses of Steinhäger and two untouched plates of ossenworst

appeared—because tragedy, in Central Europe, is always served chilled.

Nathan turned, composed himself, and tried diplomacy for the first and last time that evening.

“Excuse me, miss?” he began.

The nearer girl — one of the friend’s *friends* — arched an eyebrow so sharp it could slice kielbasa.
“What do you mean *miss*?”

Nathan blinked. “I’m sorry, I have a cold. May I ask a question?”

She gave that European nod that translates to *Proceed, condemned man.*
“Go ahead…”

Nathan pointed at himself and his friend, the full tragic tableau of two men marinated in gin and onion.
“Do we — and I call your attention to the collective *we*, as in *my friend and I* — have *any* chance, in this

or any conceivable universe, to remotely interest you in any form of interpersonal engagement other than sitting in the same room?"

The girls looked at each other. Then at Nathan and his friend. Then back at each other again — a silent, telepathic exchange of pity and anthropology.

Finally, the verdict:
"No. Not really. Not a chance."

Nathan slapped the bar with cheerful fatalism.
"Ah!" he said, turning to his friend with priestly solemnity.
"Eat, brother. Eat and drink. We are *sex-proof.* Our repugnance predates our raw sausage and onion breath."

The friend nodded, took another bite, and raised his glass.
"To evolution," he said.

And somewhere, on cue, the bartender murmured,
“Flabbergasted,”
as horses neighed in tragic solidarity outside,
and two more Steinhägers appeared—proof that
even the gods appreciate good comic timing.

As the girls reached the door — heels clicking,
perfume fleeing the battlefield — Nathan suddenly
slapped the bar again with academic revelation.

“Chapter 25! I knew it!”

His friend looked up mid-bite, onion dangling like
punctuation.
“What?”

“Conclusion, Chapter 25!” Nathan declared
triumphantly.

“What are you talking about?”

Nathan proudly raised his phone like Moses lifting
the tablets. “*The Open Society and Its Enemies.*
Popper. I had to download it. Listen to this!”

He cleared his throat with the gravitas of a man who thinks gin improves philosophy readings.
"'Of course, a point of view is inevitable; and the naïve attempt to avoid it can only lead to self-deception, and to the uncritical application of an unconscious point of view. In history no less than in science, we cannot avoid a point of view!'"

The friend stared. "Who said what about *what*?" Then realization hit him like a cold schnapps. "Wait—you downloaded a PDF… and sent the girls away… *so you could read Popper?*"

Nathan blinked, offended at the very idea of guilt. "What?"

The friend rubbed his temples. "You're impossible. I'm—"

The barman, polishing a glass, didn't even look up. "Flabbergasted?" he suggested calmly.

The friend exhaled, defeated.
Nathan raised his glass toward the man behind the counter. “Exactly.”

And, as if the cosmos itself obeyed ritual law, horses neighed in the distance, and two more Steinhägers slid forward with sacred inevitability.